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Former Colleague Aided U.S. In Trapping Ex-C.I.A. Agent

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WASHINGTON, June 28 — Last July, Ernest R. Keiser, an urbane New York businessman with mysterious intelligence connections, approached the Justice Department with an unusual offer. He said he could help the Government capture Edwin P. Wilson, a former American intelligence agent accused of illegally aiding Libyan terrorists.

At the time, Mr. Wilson was living in Libya and the American Government seemed powerless to bring him back to the United States to stand trial on a number of charges, including the illegal shipment of explosives to Libya and conspiracy to commit murder.

Mr. Keiser said he knew Mr. Wilson and thought he could lure him out of Libya so that the Federal authorities could arrest him.

Nearly a year later, on June 15, Mr. Wilson was arrested by Federal agents at Kennedy International Airport in New York City after being snared in a trap set by the Justice Department and Mr. Keiser. He was arraigned in Federal District Court here on June 18 and is currently being held in the Washington area with bail set at \$20 million.

His capture was the final act in an international drama that began last July. Played out on three continents, with dozens of participants, many unwittingly involved, the effort to apprehend Mr. Wilson was one of the most unorthodox manhunt ever conducted by the Justice Department, according to department officials. Mr. Wilson's attorney has questioned the legality of the way his client was captured.

Because of the clandestine nature of the effort and the involvement of several individuals whose credibility is questionable, a definitive account cannot yet be pieced together. Several key participants, including the Federal

prosecutors who supervised the effort, have declined to discuss the matter.

However, a reconstruction of events is possible, based on interviews with Mr. Keiser, Government officials and private individuals who were involved or familiar with parts of the trap that ensnared Mr. Wilson. What follows is their account of what happened.

The Government's initial efforts to apprehend Mr. Wilson, which began soon after he was indicted in April 1980, involved the issuance of international arrest warrants and preparation of the groundwork for extradition should he be apprehended. Mr. Wilson, by the time of his indictment, had fled the United States, moving his base of operations from Washington to Europe and Libya.

In August 1980, Mr. Wilson was seized by officials in Malta and held in custody for more than three days, but he fled shortly before he was to be turned over to the American authorities.

Eager But Sceptical

The appearance of Mr. Keiser last summer was viewed with mixed feelings by Justice Department officials. On the one hand, they were frustrated by their inability to capture Mr. Wilson and were eager for Mr. Keiser's assistance. On the other hand, some officials questioned Mr. Keiser's credibility and worried about what he might want in return. He went to the Justice Department, according to Government officials, after first approaching the White House, where officials expressed little interest in his offer.

Mr. Keiser, who lived in Mamaroneck, N.Y., at the time, described himself as a real estate and construction entrepreneur who spent 29 years in the Middle East handling a variety of intelligence assignments for the United States and other nations, department officials said.

He told officials that he met Mr. Wilson in South America in the mid-1950's while Mr. Wilson was working for the Central Intelligence Agency. He said he and Mr. Wilson had collaborated on a number of business deals.

Mr. Keiser said he decided to offer his help to the Government after hearing about published accounts of Mr. Wilson's alleged criminal activities.

Background Is Unclear

Much about Mr. Keiser's background, however, was unclear then, even to Justice Department officials, and remains so. The exact nature of his intelligence work, for instance, is a mystery. The C.I.A., according to Reagan Administration officials familiar with the case, reported that Mr. Keiser had never worked directly for the agency, but did not rule out the possibility that he might have had an indirect association.

Mr. Keiser, who appears to be in his mid 50's, has thinning light hair and a jaunty air. He speaks fluent English with a slight Germanic accent, but he said in an interview that he had grown up in Argentina and attended boarding school in Chile.

Mr. Keiser's credibility was such an issue to some Federal officials that when senior officials at the Federal Bureau of Investigation learned about his offer to help apprehend Mr. Wilson, they declined to participate in the case because, one senior bureau official said, Mr. Keiser was considered "unreliable."

F.B.I. officials said that some years ago Mr. Keiser proved to be an untrustworthy informant in another case. Mr. Keiser's attorney, Eugene M. Propper, said that the charge "was ludicrous."

Channels of Communication

Despite serious misgivings, Justice Department officials decided by late August to work with Mr. Keiser. By late August he had opened channels of communication with Mr. Wilson and the fugitive's associates in Libya and Europe. Dan Drake, an associate of Mr. Keiser, traveled to Tunisia late last summer for a meeting with several Wilson associates, according to Government officials.

Mr. Keiser's strategy, worked out with Justice Department officials, was to lure Mr. Wilson out of Libya by several means. One was to create lucrative business deals that would require his presence elsewhere. A second was to convince him that senior American national security officials were interested in intelligence information he might have about Libya and the Middle East and would consider urging the Justice Department to be lenient in his case.

Mr. Wilson was apparently receptive